Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Prof. Tamara Sonn Prepared Testimony

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Professor Tamara Sonn

College of William & Mary

PROFESSOR
SONN: Thank you; I've been asked to talk about Islam in Pakistan, and I will try to take a little bit broader view than some of the former speakers. I want to stress the complexity and dynamism of Islamic thought in the modern world in order to focus on the critical situation in Pakistan now, and then, I'll end with some policy indications, as I was asked to do. I'll also try to keep my comments under 10 minutes, but since Ambassador Oakley didn't use all his time, I'll talk right to my buzzer if you don't mind.

[Laughter.]

PROFESSOR SONN: But I will go fast.

So what I'll do is start with a very schematic historical overview of the last century, of the Muslim world, in order to stress the importance of the significance of colonialism and postcolonialism in the Muslim world and the Muslim thinking.

As you know, the entire Muslim world was colonized, and this reality influences all of its modern history, so much so that this history can be looked at as a series of efforts to deal with colonialism and postcolonialism; in other words, not an independent, autonomous history; a history that's hitched to the colonial and postcolonial realities.

To oversimplify again, there are four major phases. The first was pre-World War I, characterized by efforts to develop politically here on the European model of secular philosophies and political parties like Egypt's Waft [ph] party in order to achieve independence.

But the results of World War I caused this approach to lose what limited appeal it had. Instead of independence, more direct colonial control was imposed throughout most of the Muslim world, with France, Italy, Britain and Holland running the Muslim world from Morocco to Malaysia.

The next effort, then, was based on the Soviet model. There, militant socialism had been effective in overthrowing the powerful tsars of Russia, so maybe this model would work in the Muslim world, too, and the Bathists [ph] and the Nassers date from this period. But again, this effort failed, as was evidenced in the 1967 defeat of the combined Arab forces and in the 1971 civil war in Pakistan, for example.

So it was only after the failure of these two phases that a more indigenous or populist approach to cultural and political empowerment gained ascendancy, one that appealed to the core of Muslim identity on a broad social scale, and that's the one that's usually called Islamism or political Islam by scholars; called fundamentalism by the press.

The two largest Islamist movements were the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world and the Jamati Islami [ph] in South Asia. They had originated, of course, long before the sixties, in 1926 and 1947, respectively, but as populist movements, they took a lot longer than their predecessors to spread and to get the chance to demonstrate their effectiveness. These two movements differ in organizational styles, but their major ideologues influenced one another, and their ideologies are virtually identical.

After the failure of the two earlier foreign models, the secular European and the socialist Soviet model, both these movements claimed that Islam is the solution; this is the calling card of the Islamist movements. According to their teaching, Islam is the solution to everything: moral, social, economic, political, physical, psychological and even environmental problems.

Clearly, this approach is utopian. It's born in suffering, humiliation and frustration, and it's defensive, bordering on xenophobic, in fact, characterized by a deep distrust of the stereotypical West, a community that seems bent on undermining and even destroying the Muslim world in collusion with various regional minion states.

Ayatollah Khomeini's movement, of course, was another example of Islamism, and its success in 1979 gave a tremendous boost to Islamist popularity. Folks were very high that a return to--true Islam

was the phrase--would restore dignity, autonomy and solidarity among Muslim states. Islamist groups in various countries became very active, agitating for a return to an Islamic state, beginning with implementation of classical Islamic law, rejecting all effects and affectations of Westernism.

This was a new assertion of an Islamic identity, symbolized externally by the veil and the beard, which became very popular at this time. But the 1980s dragged on without another victory for political Islam. The Iran-Iraq war ended in a stalemate, devastating both secularist socialist or sort of phase two in my scheme Iraq and devastating phase three Islamist Iran.

Sudan had also embarked on a well-publicized Islamization program--that was the phrase--but it remained, as it does today, enmired in civil war. The 1990s seemed even worse for Islamism. Algeria's Islamists were on the verge of Parliamentary victory when democracy was overturned by a military coup, and the country descended into a hideous civil war, with combatants, some of whom claimed the Islamist mantle, drenching the country in blood.

The Soviets left Afghanistan, but then, that country's factions, many of whom identified themselves with political Islam, continued a war of attrition with each other, until everyone who could had left the capital, and those who remained feared for their lives. The result, of course, was the ascendancy of the Taliban, who perhaps epitomized the utopian and exclusivist characteristics of early political Islam.

By the time of the Algerian war and the Taliban victory in Kabul in the mid 1990s, we begin to see evidence that many Muslims are moving beyond the utopianism and defensiveism of political Islam to a more nuanced, practical and inclusivist approach to reform. It's still essentially Islamic, but there is greater recognition of the complexity of the challenges facing Muslim communities today: greater emphasis on the flexibility of Islamic law; greater willingness to accept the responsibility to find solutions for their problems rather than simply blame the West.

For lack of a better term, I call this new development post-Islamism, and evidence of it is clear, of its popularity is clear in the outcome of the recent Iranian elections, not only Khatemi's election in 1997 but the election of his colleagues last spring.

I want to stress that the rise of post-Islamism or whatever term we want to call it--I'll have to coin a phrase for that; I haven't had time yet, because it is a new development--but the rise of

post-Islamism does not mean that people are any less devoutly Muslim, nor does it mean that people are any less committed to Islamist goals of independence from foreign domination, independence from corruption and to development. But what this development means is that people recognize is that Islamism as implemented so far is not a practical political program for achieving those goals; that is, the goals stay the same, but means for achieving them are developing.

Therefore, many people formerly associated with Islamism have actually become post-Islamist, espousing progressive interpretation of legal codes to deal effectively with changed social conditions, including recognizing the public rights of women, advocating pluralism and advocating democracy. That's the broad overview.

So what about Pakistan? Their Islamism is likewise losing its popular lustre, especially among the educated, the professionals, the socially and politically engaged peoples. There is, in fact, deep frustration with those who continue to reject social and political reforms and those who continue to incite the non-politically engaged into emotional frenzy over issues like negotiation with India.

We saw an example of this in the street demonstrations in the spring of 1999, when the former government received Prime Minister Vajpayee in an effort to discuss a negotiated settlement in Kashmir. Bloody clashes with police were videotaped by the organizers of the demonstrations and distributed widely in order to raise sympathy for those who characterize compromise with India as a violation of religious principles.

There's deep frustration among the politically engaged peoples with this kind of activity. These Islamists are now characterized by post-Islamists as impeding Pakistan's progress toward conflict resolution and in the process preventing Pakistan from being able to address effectively its economic and development issues.

The fact that Islamists or Islamist parties in Pakistan have never been able to muster more than three percent of the vote in Federal elections is clear evidence of their lack of popularity among the politically engaged. However, as Ambassador Oakley pointed out, Pakistan is still a country of perhaps 35 percent literacy, primarily still rural, with relatively low organized national political participation. The majority of issues are still local for most Pakistanis: employment, education, health care in the local context, and thanks to the generous foreign aid provided to them during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Islamists could provide these local services, and Pakistan's Federal Government could not, and it still cannot as long as it is encumbered by a massive foreign debt; it's forced to compete militarily with India, a much larger and stronger economy.

Nearly half of Pakistan's budget now goes to servicing the foreign debt, and nearly half of what's left over goes to defense, thanks to the nuclear threat from India. This is the critical situation. Post-Islamists in Pakistan express fear of what they call--and this is a phrase I heard over and over again last summer when I was there--the Talibanization of Pakistan. The Islamist schools established along the border during the Soviet occupation continue to operate, again, as Ambassador Oakley pointed out, and they continue to receive funding from those who support the Taliban for whatever reason.

Most of these schools are based on the traditional religious models and are Islamist in tone; again, utopian and rejecting compromise with the perceived enemies of Islam. As long as the Pakistani Government is unable to focus its resources on development, these schools will continue to be effective in encouraging Islamist utopianism, exclusivism and rejectionism. So the politically-engaged people in Pakistan see the government as caught in a Catch 22.

India's massive militarization, including nuclear, in the context of its refusal to sign the CTBT and the Kashmir flash point combined with Pakistan's foreign debt keep Pakistan from being able to devote funds to education and development, and that keeps the majority poor and susceptible to Taliban-style influence.

So what's the solution? Policy indications quickly. U.S. help is necessary. The U.S. must put pressure on India to sign the CTBT, and what I'm doing is telling you the opinions I received over and over again from former members of government; from professionals; from judges; from students; from religious leaders. U.S. help is necessary. There must be pressure on India to sign the CTBT or a similar ban against the use of--a ban on the use of nuclear weapons so that Pakistan can sign it and relieve the world of the threat of nuclear interchange in the subcontinent.

The U.S. must also assist in a negotiated settlement in Kashmir in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people in order to establish stability for all participants in the struggle, and the U.S. must lead international struggle to relieve foreign debt so that Pakistan can concentrate on development, especially education, which will enhance both its economy and political integration.

So there's a direct relationship, to conclude, a direct relationship between India's signing the CTBT or a similar treaty; a negotiated settlement in Kashmir in accordance with United Nations resolutions; debt relief for Pakistan, between those three things and democratization and therefore stabilization in Pakistan, and that's what's necessary for Pakistanis to achieve their desire expressed over

and over again to participate in and contribute constructively to a pluralist, global community.

Thank you.